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Alexander Sosler

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Prodigal Love and a Hermeneutic of Charity: How Grace Changes Learning



by Alexander Sosler

The “New Calvinism,” or “The Young, Restless, and Reformed” movement, is known for many things. Perhaps at its best, it represents the bigness of God, the seriousness of sin, and the glory of Christ in salvation. Surely, religion on God’s terms is a welcome correction to the modern religion of expressive individualism. The renewed attention on Reformed soteriology has given rise to an increased emphasis of total depravity—often, however, total depravity applied to the other more than the self. Therefore,

Dr. Alex Sosler (Ed.D. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor of Bible and Ministry at Montreat College. His research interests are in the area of spiritual formation, education, and culture and the arts. Dr. Sosler is from Cleveland, Ohio, and “cherishes all things Cleveland.” He is married to Lauren and father to Mariela Grace, Auden Augustine, and Jude Adeodatus” (montreat.edu).

some streams of the New Calvinism movement can be known for their indifference toward systematic injustice, their disdain of other theological traditions, and a general cultural critique that sees the worst in differing sides. Disordered love is toxic, and perhaps the Reformed tradition has become so intoxicated with truth that it has neglected beauty and goodness.

A character of love should drive the disposition of one affected by grace. Rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion or critique, grace changes a learner’s posture toward the world. With a love-oriented *telos* of human personhood and the personal-shaped reality of knowing, this paper will demonstrate that 1 Corinthians 13 can be used as a proper set of educational virtues in the quest for truth. In short, the reality of grace changes the way we learn and gives teachers and students a different means of learning.

Love-Shaped Goal

First, the goal of life, and therefore learning, is ordered by Jesus: to love God and love neighbor in God. This paper assumes an Augustinian anthropology: that is, that the nature of man is one of lover—not thinker or doer or feeler. Mankind use these aforementioned attributes for ultimate enjoyment, but what one loves is at the center of one’s fundamental existence. It is *kardia*-centric. And anthropology is tied to teleology. God made men and women as lovers, and what one loves shapes one’s vision of the good life. Consequently, the ends of learning will direct the means of learning.

Personal Knowledge

Along with the love-oriented goal of all humanity is also knowledge, which is also a personally shaped reality. Fundamentally, knowing is about truth and about relationship. Parker Palmer explains truth's etymology:

The English word "truth" comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to our word "troth," as in the ancient vow "I pledge thee my troth." With this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.¹

To know is a relational engagement. It is a communal task of care; as such, charity ought to be the foundation. Since knowledge and education are more than about rational knowing, Alan Jacobs argues that true belonging is about

a fellowship of people who are not so much like-minded as like-hearted.... For there can be more genuine fellowship among those who share the same disposition than among those who share the same beliefs, especially if that is toward kindness and generosity.²

This argument compels the learner to be around generous, charitable interpreters even at the expense of agreeing with one another. Education is a social process; therefore, it is a matter of being around the proper society—namely, one oriented toward charity.

With trust, Palmer again advocates that love is the foundation of knowledge:

Knowledge originates in compassion, or love.... The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.... The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, or allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.³

In a loving relationship with truth, the whole task of education and learning is wrapped in care. Care should carry the knower and seeker. As Esther

Meeks suggests, "To care is to move toward the unknown."⁴ This is a beautiful picture of education. One should desire to know more because one cares—about the subject, about the author, about the teacher, about one's future relationships. Desire is the package that carries the knower to the unknown. Meeks explains, "Longing calls for the other to give; love actively gives oneself for the sake of the other."⁵ In other words, education is pulled by longing and directed by love.

The pressing task of the Christian college is to develop and teach a hermeneutic of charity that trains students to love, but learning to love is an inherently dangerous task. It potentially threatens what one holds most dear. Rainer Maria Rilke observes,

It is also good to love: because love is difficult. For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof, the work for which all other work is merely preparation. That is why young people, who are beginners in everything, are not yet capable of love: it is something they must learn. With their whole being, with all their forces, gathered around their solitary, anxious, upward-beating heart, they must learn to love.⁶

Love threatens in that it exposes all that we are. It is vulnerable and intimate. Because love is vulnerable and intimate, fear can easily become the context of the university and its governing attendant virtues. When "success," "excellence," and "mastery" are the standards of the day, there is no value or appreciation for love, vulnerability, or intimacy.

Defining Charity

The resources of the grace of Christ that condescends to be known change the way a Christian college should relate to its various subjects and the young people in process. Since humans are fundamentally lovers and reality is mediated through relationship and the goal of life is to love, charity is the requiring posture of knowing and learning. Love is the defining mark of humanity; love is what mankind is made for; and love is how humans know. In other words, love is the nature, the goal, and the means of education.

In a central passage in *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, Étienne Gilson contends that for Christians, the universe is most simply “a sum total of creatures owing their existence to an act of love”—the act of a creator who, “being charity...lives by charity.” Gilson imagines love flowing through the universe “like the life-giving blood through the body.”⁷ What if we, as Reformed Christians informed by the canons of Dort, were those marked by the life-giving feature of the universe? The love-oriented Savior dwelt personally among us by grace so that we may know Him.

The pattern of the gracious Christ ought to influence our knowing.

Augustine observes that “Knowledge is valuable only when charity informs it.”⁸ The Christian metanarrative has a particular set of attendant virtues—namely, those of love. It is important to define *charity*. Alan Jacobs notes that charity’s popular meaning moved from “Christian love” to “benevolence to the poor” during the seventeenth century with roots in the Middle Ages.⁹ On the one hand, charity, then, turns into a social ethic in hand-outs to the poor rather than a local expression of compassion to whoever is in front of you. Charity increasingly becomes an institutional kindness and a free gift that one could otherwise withhold. On the other hand, charity has also been linked to justice. Jacobs writes, “The tiny personal claims of love seem, many of us think, to carry little weight when compared to the sovereign demands of justice.”¹⁰ Some may wonder about the use of loving their neighbor when people are dying of starvation across the globe or they see the influence of systematic racism or incarceration. In many ways, charity became conflated with this idea of justice. Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb writes,

The old kind of charity left it to each individual to alleviate, according to his means, the suffering he saw about him. The new kind...was less instinctive, more rational and systematic. It made of charity a matter of social action rather than the exercise of a private virtue, and it transformed it from a moral obligation to a legal right.¹¹

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This history is provided to distinguish that the charity I refer to is the older sense of charity: a moral obligation to love one’s neighbor (which is whoever is in front of you). For the college campus, this means the teacher lecturing in front of you, the student beside you who does not understand the new concept, the author of the book you are reading, etc. There is a personal, moral obligation to exert charity. In the words of Cornel West, “Love is what justice looks like in public.”¹²

Means of Charity

With charity defined, I now want to compare a hermeneutic of charity to a hermeneutic of suspicion and suggest what a hermeneutic of charity could look like in practice. Paul Ricoeur defines a hermeneutic as “the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis—that

is, over the interpretation of a particular text or of a group of signs that may be viewed as a text.”¹³ In short, everyone functions with a certain rule or set of guidelines when one approaches a text or topic. A hermeneutic of suspicion is the dominant paradigm of American higher education in the twenty-first century, which functions by a set of rules that question, critique, search for lies, and subvert. I would suppose that even during these readings the dominant question is not “Where is this piece revealing the true, good, or beautiful?” but instead “Where is this wrong and where do I disagree?” These questions or guidelines often guide the modern imagination of scholarship. There is a correct stage of a critique question, but it is a poor disposition. I want to suggest that charity is a better posture for learning because “love, not indifference, invites the real.... Love presumes that the real is lovely or loveable or worth loving.... What this is arguing is that love is what enables us to see things as they are and as they are meant to be.”¹⁴ Palmer, quoting two influential sources, takes it a step further: “In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel...‘It is impossible to find Truth without being in love.’ In the words of St. Gregory, ‘Love itself is knowledge; the more one loves the more one knows.’”¹⁵ Not only is a herme-

neutic of charity better than any prevailing model; it is the only means of truly knowing. If one reads or listens only with ears to refute, then there is actually no listening taking place. Without listening, there is no thinking. Alan Jacobs acknowledges, “To enter refutation mode is to say, in effect, that you’ve actually done all the thinking you need to do, that no further information or reflection is required.”¹⁶ To be charitable learners, students must learn how to listen—and to listen is to think.

Lest one assume love is boundless and self-defined, the college campus ought to have rules or guidelines that encourage and direct love. Remember the definition of hermeneutics, as well: a set of rules in approaching a text or topic. The problem with the human heart is that it has a propensity toward wickedness, sin, and deceit. Here’s where total depravity comes in. Humans tend to be self-justifying and self-righteous. Great tragedies occur in the name of love. John Stott explains, “Love needs law to guide it. It is rather naïve to claim that love has no need of any direction outside itself. . . . Love is not infallible. Indeed, it is sometimes blind. So God has given us commandments to chart the pathways of love.”¹⁷ Rules, routine, and duty serve as guidelines that direct hearts; they function as a type of guardrail for love. Rather than being required to follow a list of moral commands, Christians are called to the law of love (Gal 5:1-6, 13-18; Rom 13:10).

Therefore, let me offer a modest definition of a hermeneutic of charity: A hermeneutic of charity is a humble, relational, and attentional posture toward a person, text, or topic that seeks to understand and so exhibit love to the person, text, or topic in front of one in order to edify the proper end of life, which is to love God. And this set of rules or guidelines is detailed in 1 Corinthians 13. Not only are these moral virtues for life, but as I’m suggesting, these are also educational virtues for learning (as if the two could be disconnected). Charity informs how one knows; it is a posture the Christian takes in learning. It is not so much external rules we must follow, but a vision of a type of person we ought to become. I Corinthians 13:4-13 reveals if a person is loving or not:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist

on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

A biblical text as rich as this requires its own book to be fully appreciated (and I’m available if any publisher wants to take me up on it); however, it is worth describing a few examples of how this hermeneutic of charity can work in practice. First, love is patient. The educational task to know requires patience, which is one reason efficiency and results so skew the academic endeavor; it is not born in love and so distorts the educational process. Love, and therefore learning, takes effort, and effort requires patience. To understand an argument, to spend time listening to an opposing view one finds abhorrent, or to read a complicated book requires patience. When a student tries as hard as she can but cannot seem to comprehend a concept, both teacher and student need to learn patience. When classmates want to rush to judgments and conclusions without hearing opposing views, they need patience. Especially in a modern, tweetable, instant gratification culture, colleges need to form patient students.

In popular usage, love is constantly affirming, and it is impossible to love someone or something and disagree with him or her. However, this is the emotivist view of love—not the biblical concept. What I don’t mean to suggest is some sort of proposal like, “Can’t we all just get along?” or “Let’s be nice to one another!” or “You know, Hitler was

probably a nice guy at heart, just misunderstood.” Our modern view of love may conjure these sentiments, but it actually distorts the true meaning of love. Furthermore, in the Bible, we find gestures of Christian warfare and conflict. Sometimes defending the truth means adequately opposing falsehood. Jude 9 demands that we contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints; Paul suggests that we fight the good fight of the faith; God is our warrior God who fights our enemies; and then there’s Ephesians 6, which includes the elements of spiritual armor to put on. While these are proper Christian gestures at times, these ought never be the Christian’s posture, to borrow a phrase from Andy Crouch. Truth, at its essence, is not a sword to wield but a beauty to behold.

According to 1 Corinthians 13, love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.” In the educational virtues, love does “not rejoice at wrong-knowing.” Love, though not critical, is discerning. Cornelius Van Til suggests, “Discernment is a feature of wisdom, which is the main goal of higher education.”¹⁸ Paul prays for the Philippians that “your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment” (Phil 1:9). He also instructs the Roman church, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom 12:9). Critical thinking, then, is a great evaluative skill but a poor understanding skill. Knowing requires a critical element but a loving stance. To seek to understand is the goal of love—to arrive at truth. In the quest for “objective truth,” the secular agenda distances the learner from the subject and therefore distances understanding. If love is the foundation of knowledge, then it starts with compassion and empathy for a person—whether he is the author, she is a classmate, or they are a research group. Love seeks true reality but is discerning enough to confess when a judgment is wrong. Mark Schwehn puts it like this: “Humility...does not mean uncritical acceptance; it means, in practical terms, the *pre-*

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sumption of wisdom and authority *in the author*.”¹⁹ Charitable thinking is a humble task after truth—not afraid of what he or she will find and also not afraid to call out error. The student can seek after truth and find it in the oddest of places.

The apostle Paul closes his list on love by concluding with faith, hope, and love. In essence, these concepts sum up the educational task. Augustine is helpful in connecting these concepts:

If faith falters, love itself decays. For if someone lapses in his faith, he inevitably lapses in his love as well, since he cannot love what he does not believe to be true. If on the other hand he both believes and loves, then by good conduct and by following the rules of good behavior he gives himself reason to hope that he will attain what he loves.... But faith

will be replaced by the sight of visible reality, and hope by the real happiness which we shall attain, whereas love will actually increase when these things pass away.²⁰

Faith, then, can be seen as the nature of the task of education: knowing truth, which includes the reasonable components of knowledge. As Augustine suggests, a knower must know something and believe it to love it. Hope can be seen as the means of love that draws humanity to character and habits and rightly ordered loves. Finally, love is the college’s happiness. It is always more passionately desired when obtained, and the task of the college is to attain more of the love of God. Love is the eternal thing to be increasingly enjoyed.

Conclusion

To be clear, a hermeneutic of charity involves thinking and knowledge. Love involves disagreement and discernment. However, thinking and discernment are means to an ultimate goal. There are limits to uses. In Augustinian terms, there are many proper uses of various faculties, but no faculty

should be turned into an enjoyment. There is only one ultimate enjoyment, and all things serve this one end: to love God and neighbor. These things remain, but the greatest is love.

Endnotes

1. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 31.
2. Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 62, 69.
3. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 7.
4. Esther Meeks, *Loving to Know* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 32.
5. Meeks, *Loving to Know*, 428.
6. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 87.
7. Quoted by Eric Miller in “Reign of Love” *Commonweal Magazine*. Published January 2, 2019. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/reign-love>
8. Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. George E. McCracken, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 366.
9. See Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 129.
10. Ibid.
11. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 148–49.
12. Cornel West, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir* (New York: SmileyBooks, 2010), 232.
13. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 8.
14. Meeks, *Loving to Know*, 435.
15. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 57.
16. Jacobs, *How to Think*, 18.
17. John Stott, *Christ the Controversialist: A Study in Some Essentials of Evangelical Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 161.
18. Cornelius Van Til, *Engaging God’s World: A*

Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 100.

19. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 48, emphasis original.
20. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

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